

## Review of Helen Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

The castrato of the eighteenth century holds a peculiar fascination for us today, as the success of the 1994 film *Farinelli* attests. Helen Berry's wonderful new book suggests that this was no less the case at the time. Part biography and part cultural history, it tells the story of Giusto Tenducci, who rose from obscure beginnings as the son of a servant in Tuscany to the pinnacle of celebrity as an international opera star. Tenducci's life story could itself be the plot of an opera, although perhaps more of an *opera buffa* than the stately *opera seria* in which he made his name. Berry's pacy narrative abounds with flights from creditors, fortunes earned and lost, encounters with great men and scandals in the newspapers. Of the latter, one of the biggest of the day was Tenducci's marriage to one of his teenage pupils, who eloped with him to avoid an arranged marriage. Dorothea Maunsell, the 'wife' of the title, emerges as a kind of Romantic heroine: threatened with incarceration in an asylum by her family, and eventually banished to a remote part of Ireland, she eventually secured a legitimate marriage to Tenducci (she even, improbably, claimed to bear his child) and published an account of her experiences. When Dorothea left him for a wealthy Englishman, a complex court case ensued in order to annul her former marriage on the grounds of non-consummation. This is the crux of the book, since the court's investigation went to the heart of Tenducci's status in Georgian society: could a castrato be a husband and, by extension, a man?

The issue of masculinity looms large in *The Castrato and His Wife*. The castrato was an anomaly in a society that increasingly defined citizenship in terms of domestic patriarchy and virile heterosexuality. Besides their lack of testicles, castrati were known for their height, long limbs, barrel chests and small heads, and were often cruelly caricatured in these terms. This is truly an example of where gender is embodied, but where the gendered body is constructed rather than being a biological constant. Besides being a bodily anomaly, the castrato was culturally suspect within Britain's bellicose political culture, which held Italian opera to be the worst example of effeminacy, luxury, foreignness and popery. Berry makes an interesting case for why there was nevertheless a prized place for Tenducci's talents within polite society. As well as being a historian of gender, the author is known for her work on material culture, and there are some fascinating insights into the practicalities of concert-going and performing. Britain, of course, was the destination of choice for composers and performers who wished to make money. Tenducci was able to sustain a successful (if financially precarious) career as a commercial performer and media celebrity, in contrast to his continental contemporaries who were the retainers of elite patrons. In this respect, his story resembles *Amadeus* more than *Farinelli*.

Berry keeps the narrative light and also provides accessible introductions to the latest social and cultural histories of the period. Newcomers to Baroque opera have nothing to

fear here, as its intricacies and technical terms are clearly explained. Oxford University Press, sensing a crossover hit, have presented the hardback attractively and pitched it at a price that should win a wide audience. Academic historians will appreciate the more analytical 'Coda', which reflects on the question that, for me, was one of the most interesting aspects of the book. In part, this book is an intellectual exercise in writing a history of someone for whom we have almost no private sources, but who exists as a mass of conflicting and highly ideological representations in the public domain. In this sense, Tenducci was always going to remain an enigma, but Berry skilfully uses him as a prism through which to explore the world in which he lived. *The Castrato and His Wife* is a fascinating journey in cultural history, and one that I can thoroughly recommend taking.